

News

US relays Trident details as MPs kept in dark

Government on back foot for 24 hours while Fallon and May fail to divulge, citing 'national security'

By **Peter Dominiczak**
POLITICAL EDITOR

BRITAIN and America last night gave contrasting accounts of a Trident missile failure following 24 hours of chaos over the incident which has seen Theresa May accused of a “cover-up”.

There were immediate calls for an inquiry on Sunday after a newspaper reported there had been a “serious malfunction” during an unarmed Trident test in June last year and that the missile may have “veered off in the wrong direction towards America”. In a state-

ment the Government said the Trident nuclear submarine had been “successfully tested and certified, allowing Vengeance to return into service”.

On Sunday morning Theresa May appeared on the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* and refused four times to say that she knew about the Trident misfire off the coast of Florida in the weeks before she forced a Commons vote calling for the renewal of the nuclear deterrent.

Mrs May said only that she has “absolute faith in our Trident missiles” and that “I think we should defend our country.” Yesterday during a regular Downing Street briefing for the media, Mrs May’s official spokeswoman admitted that the Prime Minister was informed about the test before she addressed MPs on the £40 billion renewal of the nuclear deterrent last summer.

The spokeswoman said: “The De-

fence Secretary [Sir Michael Fallon] and the Prime Minister are routinely informed when one of these specific ‘demonstration and shakedown’ opera-

tions are planned and on the outcome of them. In this instance, that was in June so it was under the then prime minister [David Cameron]. On taking

Holding the line Ministers hail ‘successful tests’

Sunday AM
A Government spokesman said: “Vengeance and her crew were successfully tested and certified, allowing Vengeance to return into service.” Theresa May said: “I have

absolute faith in our Trident missiles.”
Monday AM
Greg Clark, the business secretary, said: “It’s not the approach of the Government to comment on the various tests of weapons

systems.”
Monday PM
Sir Michael Fallon, the Defence Secretary, said: “Contrary to reports in the weekend press, HMS Vengeance and her crew were successfully

tested.”
CNN, citing a US defence official, said: “The missile was diverted into the ocean to self-destruct – an automatic procedure when missile electronics detect an anomaly.”

office, the current Prime Minister was briefed on a range of nuclear issues, including this.”

The spokeswoman declined to say whether Mrs May was informed of a malfunction in the missile system, stating it was not Government policy to discuss operational details of tests in public, and telling reporters that she did not anyway “accept the premise of the question”. “We have been clear that the submarine and the crew were successfully tested and certified,” said the spokeswoman.

Sir Michael was summoned to the House of Commons yesterday to answer questions from backbenchers. He repeatedly refused to discuss details of the launch. However, as he addressed the comments American broadcaster CNN began releasing details of the “failure”, which it said had been briefed

by US officials. CNN reported an unnamed US defence official with direct knowledge of the incident had confirmed the unarmed Trident II D5 missile veered off course after being launched from a Royal Navy submarine off the coast of Florida. The US official was reported to have said the altered trajectory was part of an automatic self-destruct sequence triggered when missile electronics detect an anomaly.

Mary Creagh, a Labour MP, said: “You have advised us not to believe everything we read in the Sunday newspapers. But should we believe the White House official who, while we’ve been sitting here debating, has confirmed to CNN that a missile did auto self-destruct off the coast of Florida?”

“And if that is the case, why is the British Parliament and the British public the last people to know?”



March of the makers? Theresa May arrives to hold a Cabinet meeting in Runcorn, Cheshire, where she launched her industrial strategy, promising an active government role post-Brexit.

And the case for the defence is... whoops, it appears to have misfired

Sketch



By **Michael Deacon**

Just a thought, but has the Government ever considered scrapping our nuclear weapons – and then pretending that we still have them? Think about it. We’d still have a deterrent (because our enemies wouldn’t know we’d done it), and we’d save hundreds of millions of pounds.

Oh, and no one would be in any danger if a test went wrong.

According to a Sunday newspaper, a test went wrong last summer, and so yesterday Labour MPs demanded Sir Michael Fallon – the Defence Secretary – come to the Commons and answer questions.

In the spirit of compromise, Mr Fallon met them half-way. He came to the Commons, but didn’t answer questions.

“We do not comment on the detail of submarine operations,” he harrumphed, every single time he was asked to confirm there’d been a

misfire. MPs “must not believe everything they read in the weekend press,” he added, Trumpishly.

Normally, Sir Michael is very effective at this sort of thing.

For years he’s been the man the Tories call on whenever there are difficult questions they don’t want to answer. His manner is so perfectly suited to the task: booming, obdurate, and simmeringly impatient, as if this trivial pestering were keeping him from something more important, such as a round of backgammon or a glass of port. He always faintly reminds me of Gordon the haughty

express train from *Thomas the Tank Engine*. On this occasion, though, Sir Michael’s approach didn’t work quite so well.

First, because his repeated refusal to confirm that there’d been a misfire implied that there had indeed been one (otherwise he’d have said unequivocally that there hadn’t).

And second, because at the very moment he was refusing to confirm it, someone else was apparently confirming it for him.

“Should we believe the White House official,” asked Mary Creagh (Lab, Wakefield), “who, while we’ve been

sitting here, has confirmed to CNN that a missile did auto-self-destruct off the coast of Florida?” One thing you’ve got to say for Sir Michael: when he’s been given a line to stick to, he sticks to it, right to the bitter end. “As I’ve said,” he sniffed, “we do not in this House give operational details of our submarines.”

Not even after our allies have given them to the world’s media.

Julian Lewis (Con, New Forest East) invited Sir Michael to appear before his defence select committee, answering sensitive questions in private if necessary. Sir Michael did

not reply. Kevan Jones (Lab, N Durham), protested.

John Bercow, the Speaker, told him it was “a matter for [Sir Michael’s] judgment. We’ll leave it there.”

Well, not quite there – because moments later, a microphone picked up the Speaker murmuring to a clerk, “To pick a fight with the chairman of a select committee is a rather stupid thing to do”.

Was Mr Bercow – who has sat in the Commons for 20 years, and in the Speaker’s chair for eight – really unaware the microphone was still on? I wonder.

GCHQ boss resigns after two years to see more of family

By **Gordon Rayner**
CHIEF REPORTER

ROBERT Hannigan, the director of GCHQ, has announced he is to leave his job after just two years because of the demands it places on his family.

The 51-year-old married father-of-two said he will stay on until a successor is appointed, but has provided the



Robert Hannigan said now was the right time for a change of direction

Prime Minister with an unwanted recruitment challenge at a time when the US president, Donald Trump, has expressed distrust of security agencies.

In a resignation letter to Boris Johnson, the Foreign Secretary, Mr Hannigan said he was proud of the work he had done and “how many lives have been saved in this country and overseas by the work of GCHQ”.

But, he said, his 20-year career as a public servant had “demanded a great deal of my ever patient and understanding family and now is the right time for a change in direction”. Oxford-educat-

ed Mr Hannigan took up his £160,000 post as director of the Government Communications Headquarters in November 2014. He was director general of defence and intelligence at the Foreign Office before that.

In his resignation letter, he said: “I feel that we are now well on the way to being fit for the next generation of security challenges to the UK in the digital age. After a good deal of thought I have decided that this is the right time to move on and to allow someone else to lead GCHQ through its next phase. I am, like you, a great enthusiast for our history and I think it is right that a new director should be firmly embedded by our centenary in 2019.”

Mr Johnson replied: “Following your successful tenure, and thanks to the work of thousands of excellent GCHQ staff, the organisation is well placed to play its part continuing to protect our nation. I wish you the very best for your future career.”

At the time he took on the job, GCHQ had been forced on to the defensive following the leak of information about mass surveillance by Edward Snowden, a former CIA employee.

Mr Hannigan took a more open approach, trying to demystify the work of the government listening post.

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Old friends Six Alberto Giacometti sculptures of female nudes are to be reunited after 60 years at a Tate Modern retrospective this summer. *Women Of Venice* will appear alongside 250 works by the Swiss artist, who died in 1966.

‘Nail in TV licence coffin’ as non-payers can escape fine

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recent years. But under the guidelines issued by the Sentencing Council, magistrates are being offered more flexibility on punishments.

Instead of a financial penalty, they will have the option to impose a conditional discharge, meaning an offender would only receive a further punishment if they committed another offence within a set period of time.

Conditional discharges would be deemed appropriate in cases where an offender has made a genuine mistake in not obtaining a licence, or has only been without one for a very short period of time.

Magistrates will also be permitted to apply their discretion in situations where the defendant had been experiencing “significant financial hardship” due to “exceptional circumstances”.

Philip Davies, a Tory MP and former member of the Media, Culture and Sport Select Committee, said it could indicate a green light for people to stop paying the licence fee.

“This is a further nail in the coffin of the licence fee, because the more it becomes unenforceable, the more the BBC will have to find another method of funding,” said Mr Davies. “The sooner the BBC get a grip on reality and move to a subscription model the better. If they are so convinced of its value

for money then they have nothing to fear from such a move.”

Andrew Bridgen, who has led calls for the decriminalisation of non-payment of the licence fee, welcomed the new guidelines but felt they did not go far enough. “People are being criminalised where their only crime is being poor and this needs to stop,” he said.

John Whittingdale, a former culture secretary, said: “In principle I am quite sympathetic to the idea. Where you have people who are genuinely struggling to pay, issuing a large fine or sending them to prison does not seem to serve any purpose.

“I would hope it would not signal a green light for people not to pay but I understand the BBC might be concerned that this would significantly increase evasion.”

A spokesman for TV licensing denied that the move would usher in a mass non-payment movement.

“We do not believe that this will have a material impact, as we already offer a conditional discharge where first time offenders who buy a licence before their case comes to court are not prosecuted,” the spokesman said.

“We would prefer people to buy a licence rather than be prosecuted but we will prosecute persistent evaders. This step does not change the nature of the enforcement of the licence fee.”